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ABSTRACT

Running is a popular form of exercise which people do for different reasons. Competitive runners (N=99) and noncompetitive runners (N=28) responded to a survey of 10 reasons for running by choosing their most important reasons for running. Subjects also indicated their age, sex, how long they had been running, their average weekly mileage, how many races they had entered, and what their best times were. The most popular reason for running was relaxation, and the least popular reason was spectator approval at races. Motivational patterns seem to emerge, dividing runners into fitness runners and competitors. Fitness runners tend to run to control weight, contribute to physical strength, prevent illness, and relax. Fitness runners are disproportionately female, relatively new to the sport, have raced rarely, and average under 20 miles per week. While the competitor also runs to relax, he/she enjoys competing. The competitor is more likely to be a male who has been running at least three years, races fairly often and logs many miles. (Author/NRB)

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WHAT KEEPS US ON THE RUN?

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What Keeps Us On The Run?

You just staggered into the house dripping wet from an icy rain with your knees and thighs aching, a blister the size of a half-dollar on one foot, and a blackened toenail on the other. You're dog-tired from breathing exhaust fumes for eight miles and you still aren't finished. Why? Because there remains a soggy dash to the bathroom in order to relieve yourself of the awful abdominal pain that accompanied your every step for the last two miles. And yet, with all these woes you know that you will be back at it again tomorrow.

The non-runner looks at us with a mixture of awe and disgust. Why would anyone voluntarily endure all that misery? If we're honest about it we'll have to admit that we too have had our doubts - especially on days like the one I've just described. So what is it that keeps us pounding the pavement? What are the most important reasons why we run? What are the factors that determine which reasons will be of greatest importance to each individual runner?

METHOD

In order to provide some answers to questions like these I surveyed 99 runners at random from four races along with an additional 28 mostly non-competitive runners from my introductory psychology classes at Northern Virginia Community College. Races from which runners were sampled included the JFK 20 Kilometer Run, the Aquia Harbor 10 Kilometer Run, The President's Five Miler and a two mile track race held in Silver Spring, Maryland. These races were chosen partly out of convenience to the author and partly because they

represented a variety of racing distances. The reason for the inclusion of non-competitive runners was a recognition of the fact that some runners have not and probably never will enter a race.

The survey listed 10 reasons why we run. Subjects were asked to indicate one or two of those reasons they personally considered most important. Nine subjects reported difficulty in limiting their choices to two, so they were allowed to list three choices. While this may have biased the results, this seems unlikely in light of the large sample employed. Table one lists the reasons in order of their frequency of choice by my subjects. They were also asked how long they had been running, how many miles they averaged weekly, how many races they had entered, and their best times for events ranging between two and 10 miles. In addition, each subject was asked to record age and sex.

RESULTS

While Table One indicates that "it relaxes me" was the most popular reason overall and "I enjoy the approval of spectators at races" was least popular, I thought it might be interesting to analyze motivational differences across several categories of runners. For example, do females tend to run for reasons that are different from those offered by males? The pattern that emerged showed a good deal of similarity between the sexes.¹ The only two differences were that females were more likely to run because it "helps control my

¹In each of the comparisons made in this study effort was made to hold constant the effect of the other variables.

weight" and less motivated to run because "I like to compete against others."²

Another comparison involved those who had been running for a relatively short period of time versus those who had been running much longer. Specifically, those who had been running for two years or less were compared with those who had been running for three years or more. The result was that the less experienced runners tended to mention "makes me feel strong" and "to avoid illnesses" more often than the experienced runners.

It relaxes me	62
Helps control my weight	56
Helps me psychologically	45
Makes me feel strong	33
I like to compete against myself	30
I like to compete against others	28
To avoid illnesses	13
Social reasons - My family/friends also run	5
I like the scenery	5
I enjoy the approval of spectators at races	2

Motivating factors for running and their relative importance

TABLE ONE

Since these two reasons are both related to physical health maybe this means that beginners are motivated by a sudden realization that they aren't as healthy as they once were (this is certainly the case with many who have taken up the sport after surviving a heart attack). Months pass by, the miles add up, and a renewed sense of strength returns to the body. What at first was welcomed as a return to the energetic years of our youth gradually becomes taken for granted. The aerobic conditioning that was originally undertaken to strengthen our flabby bodies remains important to us - indeed it may have become even more important - but now for different reasons. Confirmation for this viewpoint can be found in the results of two other recent studies. In

²These differences, like the others noted throughout this article, were statistically significant at the .05 level or beyond.

one of them the authors found that physical health reasons were important for beginners, but as they became more experienced, health gradually became less important and psychological reasons began to take on increased significance. Or, as one seasoned veteran put it: "Physical fitness is a stage that you pass through on the way to becoming a runner." The other study showed a similar trend with a sample of 350 competitive female runners.

In general, both experienced and less experienced runners tended to point to the first three reasons listed in Table One. The only other area of difference was that the less experienced were more likely to indicate a desire to compete against themselves. Does this mean that the longer we run the greater our motivation to compete against others? Maybe. I did find that the more experienced runners cited "I like to compete against others" more often than their less experienced counterparts (24% versus 14%). This difference was too small to be statistically reliable. Still, it does appear that there is a weak motivational shift from competing against oneself toward competition against others - a shift which occurs over several months or years. This makes sense from the standpoint that experience is accompanied by the realization that we are better able to compete successfully, or at least hold our own, against those in our own age and sex category.

There is another possible interpretation of the finding that less experienced runners more often prefer to compete against themselves. To some of them "competing against themselves" might have been interpreted as "preferring to run alone." This interpretation seems more plausible in light of the fact that some of the less experienced runners who liked to "compete against themselves" had never raced and did not list "best times" for any events.

If my analysis is accurate the question then arises: "Why does the beginner more often prefer to run alone?" One reason might be that the beginner

hasn't been at it long enough to establish many social contacts with other runners. Another possibility is that the beginner hasn't developed enough confidence in his own ability to seek out the companionship of a training partner.

Another way to categorize runners is according to the number of races they have entered. To do this I separated individuals into two distinct groups: those who had entered at least a dozen races and those who had raced two times or less. Many of those in the former category had raced over a hundred times while many in the latter had never raced at all.

The results indicated that both groups ran largely because it enabled them to relax. There was only one difference between the groups and it was quite predictable. Those who had raced often were much more likely to indicate their motivation to compete against others (36% as compared with only 5%). Since competition is obviously one of the major reasons why many people participate in races this result should come as no surprise. In fact, if there is anything surprising here it is the fact that the two competitive reasons were not cited as the most important reasons for running by these racing veterans.

Writer Joe Henderson recently described a three-stage evolutionary process that he feels is characteristic of most runners. Stage one is running to get into shape. Physical fitness is the principle goal in stage one. Stage two is running to race, while the third stage is running merely for the sake of running. In stage three, it is the process (running itself) that is important, not the product (good racing times). Now I don't have any way of knowing if Henderson is right about this evolutionary process, but let's assume for the moment that he is. It also seems reasonable to assume that many of the veteran runners in my study had reached stage three. If so, that might account for the fact that competitive reasons were not emphasized to the degree that one might otherwise expect from a group of experienced road racers.

The final comparison involved those who do "heavy" weekly mileage versus those whose training schedules are much lighter. Specifically, the former group consisted of those who reported running at least 30 miles per week. Many in this group were over 50 miles per week. The "light" mileage group consisted of runners who were all under 20 miles per week, with some as low as five.

I expected to find motivational differences between runners that differed so greatly in weekly training mileage, and indeed there were. While both groups frequently indicated that they ran to relax, the light mileage group was more likely to choose this reason than their heavy mileage counterparts (69% to 45%). For each of us there probably exists a fuzzy boundary line beyond which an increase in weekly mileage is more taxing than relaxing. It would appear as though runners in the heavy mileage group are more likely to cross this boundary.

Those who crank out a lot of weekly miles were also more inclined to indicate a desire to compete against others. This makes sense inasmuch as fairly heavy mileage is necessary to enable most race-oriented runners to compete successfully.

A third motivational difference between heavy and light mileage groups found the latter group more likely to choose the "makes me feel strong" response. I find a certain degree of irony in this result. While light mileage people run in order to feel strong it seems to me that in reality the heavy mileage group is actually the stronger of the two. If I'm right (and if stronger equals faster) then the heavy mileage group should have faster race times. In fact, in my sample heavy mileage runners averaged almost four minutes faster in a five-mile race. Those who put in a lot of miles are probably just as aware of the body-strengthening properties of running as those whose running schedules are much less demanding. However, from a motivational

standpoint, the heavy mileage runner has gone beyond the physical fitness stage. Physical fitness is taken for granted by many of these individuals. The purpose of the additional mileage is mostly to improve race times, not to become more physically fit. Indeed recent research shows that protection from heart disease does not really improve much when a runner increases his or her training schedule beyond 18 miles per week. The earlier comment that "physical fitness is a stage that the individual passes through on the way to becoming a runner" seems relevant once again.

DISCUSSION

In summary, some loose motivational patterns seem to emerge from what I have presented. What we might term the "physical fitness" runner tends to run largely because it helps control weight, contributes to physical strength, helps prevent illness and enables one to relax. While "physical fitness" runners come in a wide variety of shapes, sizes and backgrounds they tend to be disproportionately female. They are also likely to be relatively new to the sport, to have raced rarely or never, and to average 20 miles or less per week.

The "competitor" also gains relaxation from running (although maybe not as much), but often differs motivationally in other ways from the average "fitness" runner. The most obvious difference is the desire to compete, particularly against others. The "competitor" is more likely to be a male who has been running at least three years, races fairly often, and puts in a lot of miles.

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